

# Belleau Wood Remembered

by Emil J. Stefanacci

*Sixty-five years ago, in the Battle of Belleau Wood, U.S. Marines gave the world a vivid example of their readiness and worth. Their actions captured the imagination of America. On 30 June 1918, in admiration of the Marines' fighting prowess, the commanding general of the French Sixth Army decreed, "Henceforth in all official papers, Belleau Wood shall bear the name Bois de la Brigade de Marine."*

*When the final history of the Great War is written, it will be no easy task to assign to each of the titanic battles its proper place on the scale of importance, but if justice is done, the battle of Belleau Wood will take its place beside that of Thermopylae and other crucial battles in world history. Here was a handful of determined men, as numbers are reckoned today, who turned that awful tide, and they were U.S. soldiers and Marines. The Marines were called upon to do the impossible, and since there is no such word in their code, they did it. They left in that wood some of the best blood of America . . . outnumbered and inexperienced as they were, they fought that fight to the finish. And stopped the Hun.*

Walter A. Dyer

Day breaks early in June over western France and the morning of 6 June 1918 was no exception. The graying dawn came shortly before 0400, and not long after, the sun cast its first rays over the ripening spring wheat, amidst which stood flame red poppies under a blue sky. The peaceful pastoral scene would soon be torn asunder by the guns of war, the landscape, totally changed.

Clusters of young men, with a sprinkling of some slightly older, clad in olive drab, stood staring into the dark gloom of the forest beyond the wheatfield. Across the field to the east, on a knoll referred to as "Hill 142" on the map reference, the morning mist was lifting. The air was pungent with the smell of burnt cordite from the bombardment of the night before. With bayonets fixed on Springfield rifles held at high port, the Marines faced the Prussian machinegunners. Deadly missiles snapped through the air, taking a

tremendous toll for every yard of advance through the chest-high wheat and into the dense, foreboding wood beyond. Later in the day other battalions would jump off for their trek across the wheat to enter the main arena.

They came from all ranks of life these young warriors, and from all parts of America. Farm hands from Nebraska, cowboys from Wyoming, and city lads. A mixture of native and foreign born, from California to the Eastern shore, they came as members of a team to play a very serious game. Civilians only a few short months ago and experiencing their first combat, many dropped in the wheat, frozen by the whistle of the bullets. "Come on you sons o' bitches . . . you wanna live forever?" barked a middle-aged wiry gunnery sergeant from Long Island, N.Y. Dan Daly already had earned two Medals of Honor from previous campaigns (he fought the Boxers on the Tartar Wall in China back in 1900). His forceful admonition brought the cowering men to their senses, and they were able to continue the attack on the Bois de Belleau.

Pitted against some of the Kaiser's finest, the Marines were entering a fight that would stun the world with its sheer ferocity and incidents of heroism. A German intelligence officer reported to his commander after the battle:

After setting forth all information gained from prisoners of the 2d American Division, the various attacks of both regiments [5th and 6th Marines] . . . conclude that it may be classed as an assault division. The attacks of both regiments on Belleau

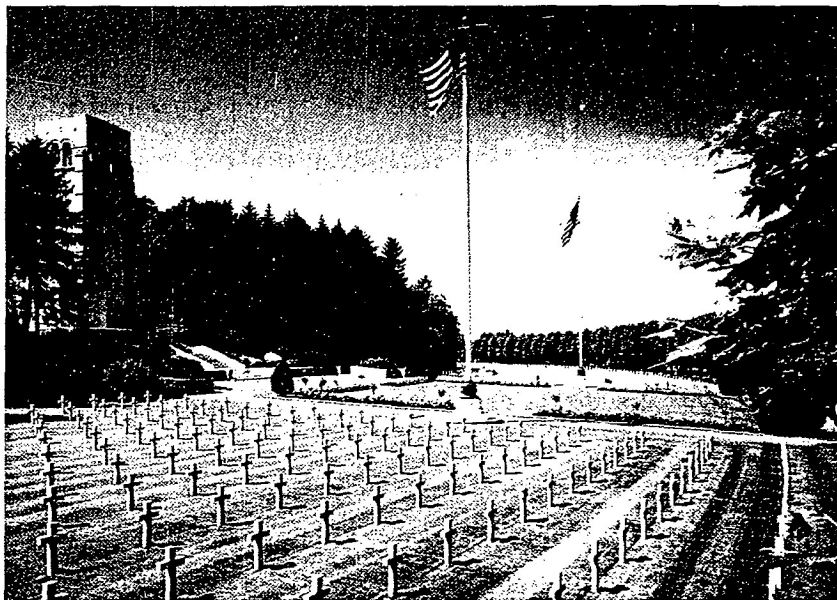


*A cool and collected Capt Donald F. Duncan leads his 96th Company, 6th Marines through the wheatfield that edges on Belleau Wood, 6 June 1918. Killed later that day, he was subsequently awarded the Navy Cross. Lt Clifton B. Cates, destined to be the 19th Commandant, assumed command of the company. The painting by Maj Darrell L. Combs was rendered from historic accounts of the battle and family photos and letters held by LtCol Michael Duncan Wyly, the grandson of Capt Duncan's sister and owner of the painting.*

Wood were carried out with dash and recklessness. The morale effect of our firearms did not materially check the advances of the enemy. The nerves of the Americans are still unshaken. . . . a remark of one of the prisoners is indicative of their spirit: 'we kill or get killed.'

War correspondent Floyd Gibbons, who made the afternoon attack with the first wave, had an eye shot out. His subsequent report of the battle, which somehow got by the censors, made the name "Marines" a household word throughout the United States. Laurence Stallings, who lost a leg at Belleau Wood, relived his experiences there in *What Price Glory*. Capt John W. Thomason, Jr., who fought with the 5th Marines, provided graphic and moving descriptions of the fighting eight years later in *Fix Bayonets*.

Why was Belleau Wood so important? This two kilometer long, oblong shaped, former shooting preserve of a French aristocrat, just northwest of Chateau Thierry, was considered a fortress by the German war machine



*The rows of crosses at Aisne-Marne Cemetery near the village of Belleau mark the graves of many Marines.*

that had rolled over the French countryside, driving the battered French army from Verdun to the Marne River. By the end of May 1918, the U.S. 2d Division had taken up a solid position along the Paris-Metz road. The Germans, under Gen Erich Ludendorff, had made a tremendously successful spring offensive and were driving toward Paris with the taste of victory whetting their palates. Marshall Ferdinand Foch, supreme Allied commander called upon Gen John J. "Blackjack" Pershing, com-



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manding the American forces, to commit his troops on a twofold mission: stop the Germans and bolster the sagging morale of the weary French troops. Gen James G. Harbord, commanding the 4th Brigade of Marines was assigned the task of stopping the advance on the high ground overlooking the Marne River valley on the North bank. Thus, the stage was set. The 5th Regiment under command of Col Wendell C. Neville (who would become Commandant of the Marine Corps in 1929), the 6th Regiment under Col Albertus W. Catlin, (seriously wounded with a bullet through the lung that first day), and the 6th Machinegun Battalion under Maj Edward B. Cole would face the Prussian Jaegers and Fusiliers, pride of the Crown Prince's 28th Division. When the battle ended some 20 days later on 26 June, the Marines had sustained 5,000 casualties. Battalions were decimated and companies all but wiped out. Thickets were filled with corpses of Marines gassed, shelled, and shot to pieces. The German casualty count was much higher as Gen Ludendorff kept throwing more and more of his best troops against the Marines.

Yet to come were Soissons, Blanc Mont, St. Mihiel, and the Argonne, but Belleau Wood would forever mark the turning point of World War I. For it was here that the world came to know that the Hun was not invincible, and that the "Amerikanen Tefelhunden" (American Devil dogs) were

a force to be dealt with.

Those who visit Belleau Wood today will find a beautifully tended forest. A closer look might reveal the slight depressions left from earlier shell holes. High among the older trees, a scar or twisted limb might attract the trained eye. The tall hardwoods planted long ago in stately rows are neat and trim as they do their job so well. Reaching for the sun, they have over the years helped to hide and heal the ugliness left by battle. The immediate grounds are well-kept, and here and there in a small clearing are the guns, forever silent; their muzzles, which at one time instilled terror in the bravest, point skyward, silent for over six decades, one of the few manmade reminders of the time.

Just beyond the wood and across the field is the Aisne-Marne Cemetery at the Village of Belleau with its rows of crosses under which lie the ever-tended remains of so many Marines. Returning warriors seldom leave without a solemn expression and teary eye. Here, so many years ago, names like Lucy LeBocage, Boursches, La Mares Farm, and . . . Belleau, hardly pronounceable at first, would later bring chills at their very mention.

Today, the Bois de la Brigade de Marine, or Belleau Wood, is United States property, maintained by Americans. It was presented by a grateful nation at another time in honor of a shared cause. But to say it was a gift wouldn't be true at all.

USMC